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“Toyota fuel system unsafe - engineer”

by Mary Alice Woodhams

The 1973 Toyota corona contains an unsafe fuel system, an engineer who tested the vehicle said yesterday as a \$165 million wrongful death case against the company entered its fourth day of trial.

Harley Holt, an independent engineer who conducted tests on several cars for General Environmental Testing in 1973, testified in Broward Circuit Court that “a warning should be issued” to consumers who own the car.

But Thom Rumberger, a Toyota attorney, said Holt’s findings were suspect, because the tests were “designed to represent failure.”

Toyota is being sued by Betty Moll, mother of Pamela, Wendy and Denise, who were killed in June 1979 when their 1973 Corona caught fire after being rear-ended on Interstate 95. Mrs. Moll, a former Davie resident who now lives in Longwood, claims Toyota was negligent in its design of the car’s fuel system.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a non-profit organization supported by the nation’s auto insurers, in 1973 commissioned tests on a 1973 Toyota Corona, Chevrolet Vega, Plymouth Fury, Opel 1900, American Motors Ambassador and Ford Pinto.

The cars were struck from behind by an America Motors Gremlin traveling 36 to 40 mph. The test speeds were greater than federal safety standards require, Rumberger argued.

Although results of the tests “were not presented to the jury, a film of the tests was shown in court this week. Titled “Cars Which Crash and Burn,” the IIHS film included a burning 1973 Toyota.

Rumberger charged the tests were rigged, because gas tanks were filled to capacity, and test cars were struck specifically in their gas-tank areas.

Holt, a plaintiff’s witness, testified that small cars in general do not have enough mass to emerge from such crashes undamaged. Had stronger metals been used in the car’s construction, Holt said, the inflexibility of the vehicle would have meant passengers would have had greater chances of injury.

In cross-examining Holt, Rumberger brought out testimony that gas tanks placed over the rear axle also tend to be dangerous. In the 1973 Toyota, the gas tank rests below the trunk, with a filler pipe underneath the license plate.

Questioned by the Mrs. Moll's attorney, Sheldon Schlesinger, Holt said Toyota compromised safety to the point of endangering lives in the 1973 car.

However, Holt pointed to a chart showing results from a test Toyota performed in its laboratories in 1968. The Corona, having the same fuel system used in 1973, had no fuel spillage from its tank after being hit by a carrier moving at 20 mph and thus complied with safety standards at that time. The car's tank was 93 percent full in that test.

Schlesinger argued the test didn't necessarily point out leaks in the filler neck. He picked up the gas tank salvaged from the Moll vehicle and placed it before the jury. "When one looks at this mechanism as an engineer, sir, what does he see?" the attorney asked Holt.

"He sees an unsafe design," Holt said.

"You've got a big car with a lot of mass, and you want a small car with a lot of economy." Rumberger said when he took another turn at questioning Holt. "Design tradeoffs do compromise safety."

"That is correct" said Holt."

By Golly, if you want an economical car you can't have a monster," Rumberger said.